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## NATIONAL / INTERNATIONAL

# Ex-general denies theft charge

*Jury to decide if he took \$19,000 from secret Swiss fund*

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — At 9:15 yesterday morning, Richard B. Collins maneuvered himself into a cramped wooden witness box in U.S. District Court with all the ease of someone who is used to working in confined spaces.

Collins, a retired Air Force fighter pilot, used his black leather briefcase as a pillow; he sat high in the witness box, where he could get a good look at the jury and they at him.

Near the end of his testimony, in response to questions from his attorney, the retired general looked at the jurors like he was sighting a target and proclaimed that he was not a thief, as the U.S. government has charged.

"Absolutely not," Collins replied when asked flat out if he was a thief.

After a day of testimony from Collins, from a retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and from two young women whom Collins courted while assigned to the U.S. European Command in West Germany, both sides rested their cases. The jury is expected to begin deliberating today as to whether the highly decorated Collins is a thief.

Collins is charged with embezzling \$19,000 from two secret government savings accounts in a Swiss bank 10 years ago. Collins testified that the

money was used by the Air Force for covert operations.

The government said that Collins took custody of a \$450,000 account in 1975 and a short time later transferred the money to two interest-bearing accounts. Collins, 55, is charged with embezzling interest totaling \$19,000 from the accounts.

The trial, which began last Monday, has been held in an atmosphere of secrecy, revealing only occasional titillating glimpses of secret government activities outside the United

States. Neither the government nor Collins wanted to divulge who got paid from the funds or what type of services the government bought.

For most of the day it was hard to tell if one was watching a criminal trial in U.S. District Court or a taping of the old television show, *I've Got a Secret*.

When he took over custody of the \$450,000 account, Collins testified, untold numbers of Air Force personnel knew about it and he recommended to his superior officer that the account be closed.

But he said his boss, Gen. George Brown — then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — told him to keep the account open, maintain its current balance and also to keep a separate contingency fund, which he used for travel and other costs related to maintaining the secret account.

Collins said that when Brown told him to keep the account, he went to Geneva, took the money out of the bank, took it several blocks to another Swiss bank and opened up two interest-bearing accounts.

Collins testified that he also kept a petty-cash fund and that in March 1976 he went to Geneva and paid 20,000 Swiss francs "to an individual for covert intelligence."

When defense attorney Stephen Bronis asked Collins what the activities were, the prosecutor objected and Judge James C. Paine instructed the jury to ignore the question.

Bronis tried again: "General, isn't it true that you were the banker for millions of dollars. . . ."

But the prosecution cut him off with an objection and Paine said: "I direct you not to ask any more questions along that line."

Collins testified that not only had he not stolen money from the government, but that he had lost \$4,000 of his family's money. He said the

account was "short about \$16,000" in 1976 when it was up for a yearly audit. He said he directed a Swiss account executive to transfer \$16,000 from his personal account to the covert account and, by mistake, \$75,000 was transferred. He said he eventually transferred back all but \$4,000 of the money.

When asked why he never requested the remaining \$4,000, Collins used his best fighter-pilot-calm voice and said: "When you've put your life on the line for the United States, you don't ask for \$4,000."

During his five hours of testimony, Collins reviewed a career that began at the U.S. Naval Academy and carried him to the skies over Vietnam and the hallways of the Pentagon. He said he volunteered for combat in Vietnam when he was in his mid-30s because "I was a hot pilot" and because the young pilots just out of flight school could use his leadership.

He said he flew secret bombing missions over North Vietnam and received two Distinguished Service Medals. While he was stationed in Europe at the U.S. command center in Stuttgart, West Germany, he said he drove a Porsche and spent many weekends skiing in resorts in Switzerland, Italy and France.

While the government never said in its case what Collins did with the \$19,000 he is accused of stealing, it did present two women who said that they accompanied Collins on weekend holidays and that most of the times Collins paid for the trips.

Defense attorneys said the money came from Collins' own salary and from a quarter-of-a-million-dollar inheritance from his father-in-law.